

## Constructing Local History Units with Document-Based Lessons

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TO DESIGN A UNIT, begin with the end in mind. Good advice, but where is the end for a history teacher? While standards and assessments demand that students be able to recall content information, planning guides direct teachers to prioritize the development of transferable skills and understandings,<sup>1</sup> and scholars of education have spent the past century debating the purpose of history instruction without approaching consensus.<sup>2</sup> The field is still divided as to whether the primary aim of history class is to help students accrue knowledge about their heritage, develop a skillset for inquiring about the past, or activate their desire to improve society.<sup>3</sup> Reading that laundry list, a teacher might reasonably wonder how they are supposed to teach students to think like historians, reflect like psychologists, and act like activists. In a single lesson, there is rarely time to explore the past, the present, and the personal. Yet history is meaningful precisely because it spans eras and connects individuals to groups. In this article, I introduce the Document-Based Unit and argue that history teachers can help students engage with history at multiple levels through the thoughtful design of units.

While the limited time frame of a single lesson often forces teachers to choose whether they will prioritize understanding the past, present, or personal over the course of a unit,<sup>4</sup> it is possible to layer multiple aims and objects of history instruction in mutually reinforcing ways. Document-Based Units pose unit questions that explore the connection between past and present, engage students in a sequence of Document-Based Lessons (DBL) to establish rich contextual knowledge, and ask students to utilize that knowledge in answering the unit question. A DBL is a lesson planning format that provides students with a set of documents (often primary sources) that offer conflicting portrayals of historical topics, and asks students to grapple with those uncertainties through whole-group discussion.<sup>5</sup> Existing guides to DBL planning support teachers in designing stand-alone lessons that supplement more traditional units, such that a DBL on Japanese American internment might be sandwiched between a lecture on Pearl Harbor and a jigsaw on major battles in WWII.<sup>6</sup> This article, however, explores creating an inquiry unit with several DBLs in succession. For teachers, repeating a similar format may be less taxing than trying to master a host of different lesson formats. For students, familiarity with lesson structures allows them to devote greater attention to the content, and multiple days doing deep inquiry in a single historical context may aid retention and enable more complex learning. This article goes beyond previous work on building a lesson from primary sources to focus on constructing a unit from those lessons. To plan a Document-Based Unit, teachers must ask themselves four questions:

1. What is significant to teach?
2. What historical questions will spark inquiry?
3. How can I sequence and structure lesson materials to make inquiry accessible?
4. How might my plans change as I teach?

To demonstrate the design principles of Document-Based Units, I draw upon my experience writing a three-week local history unit for Philadelphia public school teachers in response to the city's unveiling of a monument to Octavius Catto. Catto was a prominent Black intellectual and activist who led movements for abolition, enfranchisement, and desegregation in Philadelphia before his murder in 1871. Sometimes called the Martin Luther King, Jr. of his era,<sup>7</sup> Catto's recently erected monument is the first public statue of a Black person in the city.

### **Question 1: What is Significant to Teach?**

If we want history classes to be meaningful, it is important to consider what stories we choose to tell. With a surfeit of content clamoring for space in our classes, teachers need to consider what is truly significant. To determine what content has historical significance, teachers should focus on material that is relevant and revelatory.<sup>8</sup> A relevant event speaks to a student's particular circumstance and place. A revealing topic helps students understand the past by uncovering recurring themes (e.g., the struggle for freedom), concepts (e.g., cultural diffusion), or frameworks (e.g., feminist theory).

I wrote the Catto unit to puncture myths. Most history textbooks teach about racism in America as a linear progression from slavery, through the Civil Rights Movement, to equality—a reductive story that hides the variety of Black agency and experience across American history.<sup>9</sup> Philadelphia (the center of free Black culture long before the Harlem Renaissance) and Catto (who grew up free, educated, and politically active before the Civil War) are vivid counterexamples to simplistic stories of passive slaves. At the same time, Catto's struggle for equality and eventual murder also challenge myths about the anti-racist North and Philadelphia as a Quaker bastion of equality. Because myths resist nuance, Catto's life story is revelatory because it exposes the limitations of familiar historical narratives and texts.

Just as revealing history helps students understand the past, relevant history helps unpack the present. In assessing the relevance of a historical episode, teachers should consider its connection to students' space, time, and identities. Local history, studying places and persons familiar to students, has been shown to make the past feel more concrete and encourage students to wrestle with questions of evidence.<sup>10</sup> Teaching for relevance in time requires making explicit connections between historical content and current events. Teachers can do this by exploring the direct repercussions of a historical event, such as the ways that the Eisenhower era policies of redlining, housing covenants, and the Federal Highway Act are reflected in the current segregation of American cities,<sup>11</sup> or by using thematic links. For instance, there is no need to posit a direct causal link in order to discuss the resonance between the Chinese Exclusion Act and the Trump administration's attempts to ban travelers from Muslim

countries. What matters most is making the connections direct and overt.<sup>12</sup> Connecting past and present is a skill—one that students may need help developing.

Early in my planning of the Catto unit, I made the error of mistaking recognition for relevance. Worried that students might struggle to relate to Catto nearly 150 years after his death, I considered centering the comparison to Martin Luther King, Jr. I thought students were likely to be familiar with King and the comparison between two Black men who led non-violent movements to desegregate public transportation and were murdered at the height of their public influence has some merit. The century separating Catto from King could be an exciting place to explore contextual differences and themes of change and continuity. But the goal of relevance is to explain the present. Connecting Catto's 1870 to King's 1960 does not necessarily illuminate students' 2021. Not only could a comparative approach water down both men's individuality, having some familiarity with King does not guarantee that the connection would be meaningful for students.

Pivoting, I emphasized relevance in space and time. Because I wrote this unit as a consultant to Philadelphia teachers, I did not have personal relationships with its intended students. Still, I hoped that the fact that Catto was from Philadelphia provided a natural connection to a city that students knew. To deepen that connection, I leaned on the monument. I framed the unit around the question, "How should Catto be remembered?" and, as a final performance assessment, asked students to design a supplement to the monument. I intentionally left the term "supplement" broad, giving students space to imagine a number of extensions, ultimately including designing additional statuary to represent other Black leaders of the era, murals to represent pivotal events in Catto's story, and pamphlets to inform visitors to the memorial. Throughout their creative process, the physical presence of the statue and its prominent and symbolic location on the southern hem of city hall combined with other markers of Catto's life, including murals and plaques, to help students feel that Catto existed outside the classroom. While they cannot walk in Catto's shoes, many students will stroll the same streets he did. As I wrote the unit, the country was wracked by debates about memorials, memory, and justice. The erection of Catto's monument inverted the images of Confederate memorials being torn down. Embracing that resonance, I opened the

unit with a brief introductory lesson on memorials. Students needed to think about the meaning and iconography of monuments to design their supplement, and doing so provided an opportunity to connect discussions across the country and in their own city, where activists were demanding the removal of a statue of a former mayor who urged voters to “vote white.”<sup>13</sup> Unlike historical narratives, which move slowly, relevance shifts suddenly. If I were to rewrite the unit today, in the aftermath of the 2020 presidential election, I would emphasize the role that fears of election fraud, voter intimidation, racial violence, and police violence played in Catto’s life. A significant episode of history can offer multiple avenues of connection, provided that teachers are prepared to look for them.

*Key Questions for Historical Significance:*

- What do today’s students need to know about the past?
- How does this information help students understand both the past, the present, and their personal relationship to history?

**Question 2: What Historical Questions Will Spark Inquiry?**

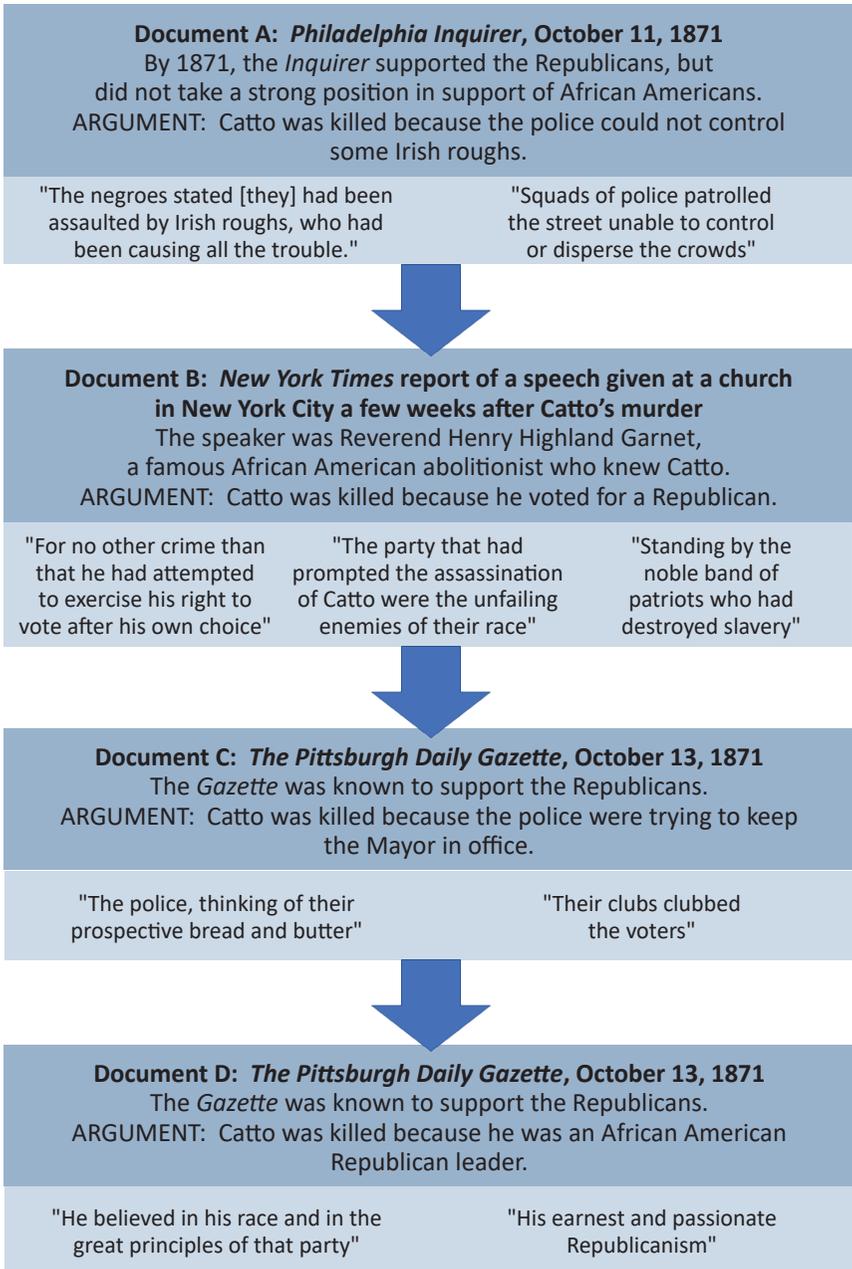
Great inquiry comes from great questions. Because Document-Based Units aim to inspire exploration of both past and present significance, they require two kinds of questions. A unit question ties all the lessons within a unit together and provides an opening for exploration of the present and personal. Daily lesson questions, however, should motivate students to engage with historical evidence. In the DBL approach, which I draw upon, the teacher takes on the responsibility for writing historical questions that create historical problem spaces as a scaffold until students are confident creating their own historical questions.<sup>14</sup> In this model, a successful daily lesson question is open to argument, can only be answered by using text, and can be applied to multiple documents so students can see the inconsistencies in the historical record. Teachers prepare documents and pose the central historical question of each lesson as a scaffold to help students focus their cognitive bandwidth on interpretation and analysis. Daily lesson questions are more likely to focus on historical causation or “how” questions, while unit questions are more likely to engage with ethical “should” questions, which inherently draw on

contemporary moral values. The process of writing and researching these questions is iterative. Interesting texts prompt questions, and questions drive a researcher to find more interesting texts. Either starting place can be productive.

Once I had a framework for historical significance and a unit question for Catto, I needed to write lesson questions that reflected the available historical evidence. Initially, I thought “Was Octavius Catto assassinated?” would serve as the lesson question for the final day of the unit. I thought this question could interest students, lead to compelling discussion about how victims of lynching are remembered differently from victims of assassination, and, most importantly, build to the unit question. Understanding why Catto died is essential to articulating how he should be remembered today. But that question would only work if I could find rich texts.

To this end, I chased a series of documents alleging that Catto was murdered by an operative of the Democratic Party. I ultimately discarded this angle for three reasons. First, the discussion comparing lynching and assassination was conceptually abstract, and I worried about the background knowledge required for all students to successfully access it. Second, I was not convinced of the reliability of the documents describing the Democratic hit job. While there is value in having students debunk conspiracy theories, I was wary of centering that specific argument without additional textual documentation. Third, and most importantly, I worried that the assassination angle painted this as an anomalous and overly specific instance. Given that the murder of African Americans was an all too common occurrence, and my goal was to use local history to reveal broader trends, I thought it best to rephrase the question.

I eventually decided on the historical question of “Why was Catto killed?” Although not as sharp as the assassination wording, it was clear and I could create a document set that allowed students to justify a number of legitimate conclusions. In this case, newspapers disagreed about the cause of the 1871 election-day riot in which Catto was murdered. Reading these contemporaneous sources, students could see arguments that Catto was killed by the largely Irish pro-Democratic mob because he was a Black man, because he voted against the incumbent Democratic Mayor, or because he was known to be an activist (**Figure 1**). Each newspapers’ account is colored by its political leaning and its position on African American



**Figure 1:** Lesson Outline for the “Why was Octavius Catto killed?” Document-Based Lesson

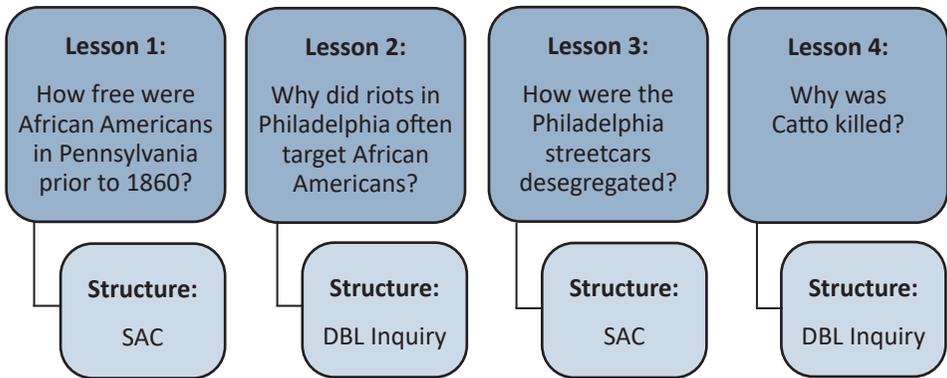
civil rights. The historical record is messy and inconclusive, and students can arrive at different conclusions. What is unavoidable is that they wrestle with the ugliness of this historical moment and the incompleteness of our historical knowledge.

*Key Questions for Forming Daily Lesson Historical Questions:*

- Are the questions I'm asking significant, grounded in text, and open to interpretation?
- Do the questions require students to think about where the evidence comes from, not just what it says?

**Question 3: How Can I Sequence and Structure Lesson Materials to Make Inquiry Accessible?**

Like writing a thriller, planning an inquiry unit or lesson is all about structuring a reveal. Teachers should give students a logical progression of concepts, deliberate scaffolds to ensure entry, and reserve some unknown resolution long enough for students to be empowered as sense-makers.<sup>15</sup> For the unit, this means considering both the order and structure of lessons. The key is providing students enough background knowledge to access the material without limiting their intellectual exploration. One way to approach this task is by supporting students' historical reading in layers. By limiting their introduction of information to a few minutes of essential background knowledge, teachers can avoid chewing up students' time to read and think with lecture. Creating multiple opportunities to process text—first independently, then in small groups, and finally in whole-group discussion—not only gives students multiple chances to understand and inquire, it can also allow teachers to observe students' struggles and insert scaffolds as needed. Teachers can also support students' reading through intentionally varying lesson structures. Because different lesson structures prompt different kinds of thinking, teachers need to select the format that best supports the central question. A Structured Academic Controversy (SAC), which asks students to work towards consensus as they weigh nuanced yet contradictory evidence, may be ideal for interpretive questions surrounding issues that are comprehensible but controversial.<sup>16</sup> Inquiry DBLs, on the other hand, repeatedly introduce new evidence to deepen students'



**Figure 2:** Historical Central Questions and Lesson Structures for the Octavius Catto Unit

understanding and are well suited to events where the documentary record is unclear or historical myths obscure a true account of what happened.<sup>17</sup> Thoughtful ordering and variation of lesson type can give students the sense that their understanding of the content is building across the unit. Within a lesson, sequencing the texts so the first document builds comprehension and context and the last document offers new complexity achieves the same effect.

Building the Catto unit, I structured four historical questions so students would spend two days immersed in the context of free Black life in Philadelphia before introducing Catto (**Figure 2**). I wanted to locate his accomplishments and death against the backdrop of possibility and violence that characterized that moment in time.

I found establishing Catto's context efficiently to be the greatest challenge in the unit plan. The first context lesson is a SAC asking, "How free were African Americans in Pennsylvania prior to 1860?" The SAC structure places students at opposite ends of the spectrum and then prompts them to move towards consensus. In the case of this lesson, students began with the assignment to gather evidence for the binary argument that Black life in Philadelphia was either free or unfree. Over the course of the class discussion, they moved towards the consensus that freedom is more complex than simply the absence of slavery and Philadelphia contained both opportunity and constraint. I wanted students to know about the frequent bloody riots in Philadelphia because they reveal the obstacles facing Catto and foreshadow his death, but I thought including that information

in the first lesson would unbalance the SAC, making students too attuned to the lack of freedom in Philadelphia without considering that virtually all Black life in America was unsafe. Fitting the riots into the SAC while still allowing for a lesson that could be completed in a period would also require them to be represented by a single document. Instead, I decided to create a separate DBL on the question, “Why did riots in Philadelphia frequently target African Americans?” To address the content robustly, the inquiry structures needed to push students beyond their immediate hypotheses. So, for the first document, I selected a straightforward account that directly attributed the violence to racism. I imagined students would be unsurprised that racial violence is caused by racism, so the subsequent documents were opportunities to go deeper. The next two documents asked, “What causes racism?” and explored the economic and political forces that profited from maintaining racism. The lessons on freedom and riots are structured differently because they have different instructional goals. In the first, the goal is for students to engage with a broad variety of sources, from diaries to employment data, to see variations in people’s lived experiences. The second aims to investigate a single phenomenon with increasingly complex lenses. Whether you need a net or a drill, it is important to pick the right tool for the job.

*Key Questions for Structuring Lessons:*

- What lesson structure positions students to be decision makers?
- How does each lesson deepen students’ knowledge of the historical context?
- How does each document in a lesson add complexity?

**Question 4: How Might My Plans Change as I Teach?**

The best-laid plans create opportunities for learning, but teachers know that their work is improvisational, shifting in response to students’ changing needs.<sup>18</sup> While it may not ever be possible for teachers to completely predict what might happen within a class period, preparing to adapt is part of preparing to teach. Teachers can build structural adaptability by adding “overflow” days or activities

into units with material that would extend the historical inquiry (yet are not critical to its structural stability), but the most important adaptations come in response to student thinking. Teaching justly and courageously requires giving our students opportunities to explore connections between their identities and the past. Preparing for those conversations means carefully considering both their and our identities in relationship to the content and to each other. Teachers' depth of knowledge, comfort with the content, and openness with identity will help them anticipate the novel directions students might travel in discussions.

I observed four teachers teaching the Catto unit, and each adapted it to the needs of their students. One notable contrast in adaptation came from two teachers working in the same school. Although both teachers described the unit as a success, they delivered the material in different ways. One teacher noted that her students had a lot of background knowledge on the history of race in the United States, but "the things that are most surprising for them, teaching Catto, is the fact that it's happening in Philadelphia." A native of the city with over a decade of experience teaching in Philadelphia and a Black woman teaching mostly Black students, this teacher was well-positioned to build on that surprise. She injected dozens of additional pieces of information throughout the unit, referred to local landmarks and celebrities, and emphasized Catto's local significance. The second teacher, new to the city and Asian American, did not have the depth of knowledge or shared heritage to mine the local significance of the topic. Instead, well-versed in Critical Race Theory, she emphasized the connective tissue of the units' themes. Reflecting on a scripted guiding question accompanying one of the documents, she said:

I was surprised when...[discussing the] question that says, "Du Bois was well-educated, famous and wealthy. When he wrote *The Philadelphia Negro*, some of his critics said he favored elites like himself. Does this document support or challenge that criticism?" So, me reading Document B, especially with that part about "poor, ignorant fugitives," I had thought that it shows Du Bois to be an elitist and to be judgmental of the new [Black] migrants [arriving in Philadelphia from the South]. Some of my students were like, "Well, they were uneducated, so it's not judgmental to say that they're ignorant, it's just descriptive."

This teacher drove the conversation towards an extensive examination of intersectionality and privilege, pushing students to consider the tension between W. E. B. Du Bois' academic privilege with his insider's perspective as a Black man. Without offering a critique, the teacher prompted students to consider the question from multiple perspectives and gave her students opportunities to challenge, support, and evaluate one another's thinking. For both teachers, surprise was a prompt to adapt the unit. The first teacher navigated towards her students' surprise, while the second used her own surprise to signal the need for further discussion. Rather than constricting their options, the meta-structure of the unit enabled teachers to pursue teachable moments. Because they understood the content, the arc of the lessons, and the broad concepts at play, they were able to adapt in the moment without sacrificing the instructional aims. The best unit planning recognizes that there will always be surprises and allows for personalization and improvisation.

*Key Questions for Anticipating Adaptation:*

- What elements of each lesson are essential for accessing the broader inquiry arc of the unit?
- Where are there opportunities to personalize this content for students?
- What makes the students in this class distinct from others? How can I center their needs, interests, and identities?

### **Conclusion**

Well-planned units are an opportunity for teachers to make the past meaningful and tangible. Document-Based Units are one way to give students experience exploring historical evidence and making connections to the present and the personal. Instructional plans are part of the intimate exchange between teachers and their students, and there is no one-size-fits-all approach, but sharing scaffolds and structures can make us all better equipped. With relevant and revelatory lessons, evocative questions, coherent structures, and flexible instruction, teachers can animate their instruction and help students see their surroundings and selves in new lights.

## Notes

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